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Synopses of Important Articles.

THE FELLOWSHIP OF GOODS IN THE APOSTOLIC CHURCH. By the REV.
SANFORD H. COBB, A.M. *Presbyterian and Reformed Review*,
January 1897, pp. 17-34.

The “community of goods” of the New Testament has often been claimed by modern communistic and by some socialistic writers as a justification of their radical theories. They assume that the conditions of property, as regards personal ownership and use, obtaining under that early community were substantially the same as those proposed by themselves.

On the other hand, to say that this early institution has naught but a negative teaching for today is also a fallacy. This fallacy rests largely upon a misnomer and upon two preconceptions. First, the institution referred to in Acts 2: 44, 45; 4: 32, 33, 35 was far different from that implied in the term “community” usually associated with it. It had no sympathy either with close community, or with general equalization of property, or state ownership. The term “fellowship” is more allied to the reality. The fallacy also rests upon two preconceptions: (a) The institution was intentionally designed to be but temporary and transient, and thus is utterly impossible today; (b) this fellowship was a mistake of enthusiasm.

The fact that it disappeared is no proof that the Lord designed it should disappear. Moreover, had this first step in the forming of a general policy been a mistake, it would have received, not the apostles’ approbation, which it did, but their correction. A cursory study of the narrative overlooks certain factors the neglect of which gives color to the preceding misconceptions.

A few of the general facts of the time and condition of this early institution are to be noted: (a) The description of this institution presupposes that condition of society in which the rich and poor, the strong and weak, are mingled together. The difference between the condition of the church and the general condition of society was one of spirit and not of material things. (b) The narrative shows a hearty concession of the natural claim which poverty makes upon the rich for

sympathy and help. (*c*) Whatever the details, they were the results of a universal love—love in vigorous and beneficent action. (*d*) This early fellowship presupposes the Christian and the church. It was the outgrowth of Christian life and principle and not a matter of worldly policy.

If we look at this narrative more in detail, we see that: (*a*) this fellowship was not a leveling process—not a general partition of the whole stock of possessions among all the members of the church, share and share alike. This for two reasons: first, inequalities in condition because of rank and wealth are inevitable in the world and in the church so long as there are inequalities of capacity; second, such a leveling idea is a theory of wealth which is utterly unchristian. Only the lust of money can demand the communist's share and share alike. (*b*) It was not a putting of all possessions into a common fund. There was no total suppression of personal title. The rich parted with only such of their wealth as they were pleased to give for the use of the poor. The movement was not one either to pauperize the rich, or to enrich the poor. (*c*) It was not compulsory. This is most significant. The apostles laid no law upon the church commanding all Christians to sell their property and give to the poor (*cf.* Acts 4: 32; 5: 4). Ananias was punished because he lied, and not because he gave only a part of his money. Love is indeed a law, but not compulsion.

Was this early institution temporary and local? After the appointment of the deacons we find no formal reference to it. There is no reason, however, to suppose that the institution ceased to exist in Jerusalem until the destruction of the city. Moreover it is a safe presumption, supported by many incidental references in the epistles, that it existed elsewhere than at Jerusalem; for according to the view here taken, this fellowship had in it nothing abnormal, no infringement of individual liberty, nothing subversive of social order. But there is not an entire lack of evidence concerning its further extension. The fact of the appointment of deacons in other churches, their duties of serving the church and its poor in the collection and distribution of alms, evidence the same spirit of fellowship. And there is abundant reference elsewhere to the principle of fellowship underlying this early fact. Great stress is laid upon the duty of helping the poor. The very phrase "common" used in describing this early fellowship finds expression, with slight change of form, in references to other churches and to Christian duty (*cf.* "communicate," "communication," "com-

munion;" Phil. 4: 14, 15; Gal. 6: 6; 1 Tim. 5: 22; 6: 18; Rom. 12: 13; Heb. 13: 16; 1 Peter 4: 13).

Contrasted with this early fellowship modern schemes of communism are as darkness to light. The Christian fellowship is the offspring of godly love; communism is the spawn of human greed and envy. Christian fellowship says, "All mine is thine;" but communism, "All thine is mine."

Can this institution be set up as a model to the church and society of today? Certainty and authority as to method and details cannot be attempted. Some things are, however, reasonably clear. Christianity has failed adequately to recognize its mission concerning the question of property and its use, questions concerning which it ought to teach if it be true that the church is set for the redemption of the world from all its oppressing evils. The lesson of the Golden Rule and of the second commandment—"Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself"—found its best outspeaking in the apostolic church, illustrated in its fellowship and mutual service. Love, if present, will bring its own methods suited to the hour and circumstance. We must insist upon it as the great and only successful solvent of the perplexing problems of today. Avarice, oppression, and envy would depart, and no suffering which a brother could relieve would affect the humblest member of society.

Here, then, would seem to be the teaching of that early fellowship for the church and society of today.

The writer of the above article has done great service both as antagonist and as apologist. In disclosing the real character of this early institution, which he rightly terms "fellowship" instead of "community," he has deprived the modern communist of his props of seeming scriptural warrants for his vagaries, and at the same time has elevated that early fellowship to a position in which it will be sanctioned by Christian common sense, instead of being excused, as it often has been, because misunderstood. There is not much to support the author's view that this early fellowship existed outside of Jerusalem in any such manner or degree as characterized it in that city, though of course there was Christian generosity and charity in every Christian community. The writer's interpretation of the New Testament in one place at least will not bear the closest scrutiny, *i. e.*, page 21, his treatment of *ἐπι τὸν αὐτὸν*. Notwithstanding a slight failure to maintain strict coherency and the most cogent development and arrangement of material, the paper manifests scholarly insight and close analysis. In support of Mr. Cobb's conclusion, bearing in mind also his statement that this fellowship presupposed the Christian and the church, witness the objects and efforts of the recent commissions on systematic beneficence.

W. P. B.